

NEBR HISTORY
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Ernst H. Herminghaus, Landscape Architect

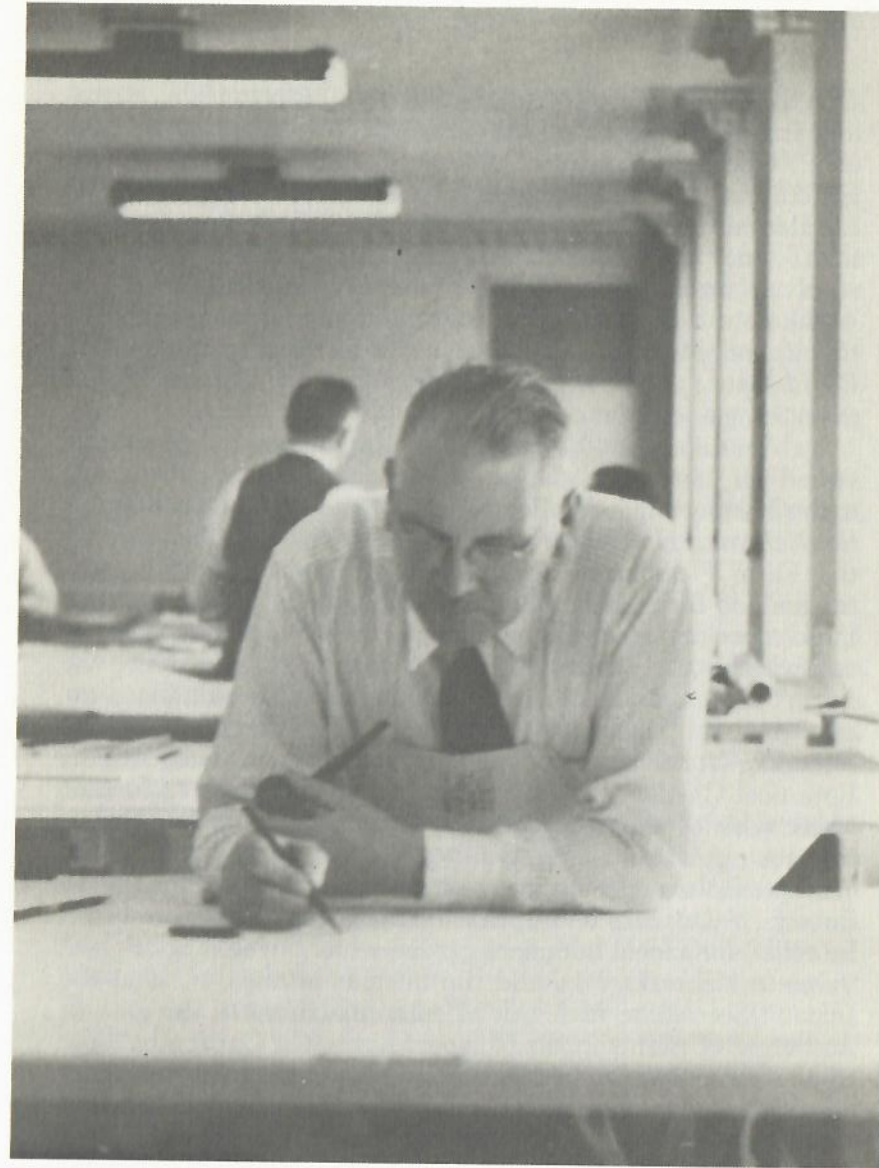
By Richard K. Sutton

Appreciation and sensitive management of landscapes designed and planned in a different era requires thorough understanding of the background and professional vision of their creator. For example, in determining a maintenance program, restoration, or addition to an existing piece of landscape architecture, today's designer is often faced more with the problem of original "design intent."

For 40 years Ernst H. Herminghaus designed and supervised installation of significant landscape settings in Lincoln and eastern Nebraska. Several of these landscapes, such as the State Capitol grounds and Lincoln's Pioneers Park, have undergone changes which threaten their original integrity. This article explores the life and influences on Ernst Herminghaus in an effort to understand his design style.

Ernst Herman Herminghaus was born on December 31, 1890, into a family of German immigrants. His father was a cigar manufacturer, and the family lived in the expanding area of south Lincoln. It is significant that Herminghaus was born about the time that the frontier was closing, because he represents a second generation of pioneers who were responsible more for developing culture than for conquering prairie. In Nebraska, this turn-of-the-century cultural theme for Ernst Herminghaus focused upon adoption and adaption of essentially European and eastern American Beaux Arts landscape styles. Adaption of landscape design style to the rigorous prairie climate would be the first step before an indigenous style could emerge.

During his childhood in Lincoln Ernst Herminghaus witnessed the capital city change from a dusty, bustling frontier town into what he later called "a progressive middle-western city."¹ While Herminghaus's three older brothers entered business occupations, Ernst attended and was graduated from Lincoln High, but only he and his sister Alma received college educations.²



Ernst Herminghaus, Alaska, 1943-1944. Courtesy of Mrs. Martha Herminghaus.

In the fall of 1909 after graduation from Lincoln High, Herminghaus matriculated at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, where horticulture, the most refined of the liberal agricultural arts and sciences, attracted his interest. While he excelled in horticulture, his courses also included music, German, and engineering. Herminghaus's outside activities revolved around Farmhouse Fraternity, Agriculture Club, Alpha Zeta Honorary, and the fruit judging team. Speaking of this liberal education, a quote under his picture in the 1913 *Cornhusker* yearbook states, "He knows a little bit of everything and not much of anything."³

By his junior year, however, Herminghaus was well enough versed in landscape design theory and the use of plant materials to write a detailed article for the 1911 *Proceedings of the Nebraska Horticultural Society*. The article, "Beautifying the Farm," discussed appropriate ornamental planting arrangement for a farm home. Herminghaus commented on building colors, encouraging farmers to "select a neutral color, one which will blend with the landscape."⁴ "Beautifying the Farm" represents the first important theme Herminghaus explored during his career. In the 1913 *Proceedings of the Nebraska Horticultural Society*, as he described "The Missouri Botanical Garden," we see the germs of two more important ideas which recurred throughout his career. First Herminghaus notes that the garden was a cultural setting in which "the public was permitted to share the refining influence of flowers."⁵ This was re-emphasized in the conclusion, in which he called for a local botanical garden which "would be of great value to Nebraska . . . and the nucleus of one . . . is at the farm."⁶ Second he makes detailed comparisons of the growth and vigor of plants in the Missouri Botanical Garden to those of the same species in Nebraska. This comparison of what would or would not grow well in Nebraska was a constant theme throughout his life and resulted in his personal plant palette of hardy trees, shrubs, and perennials.

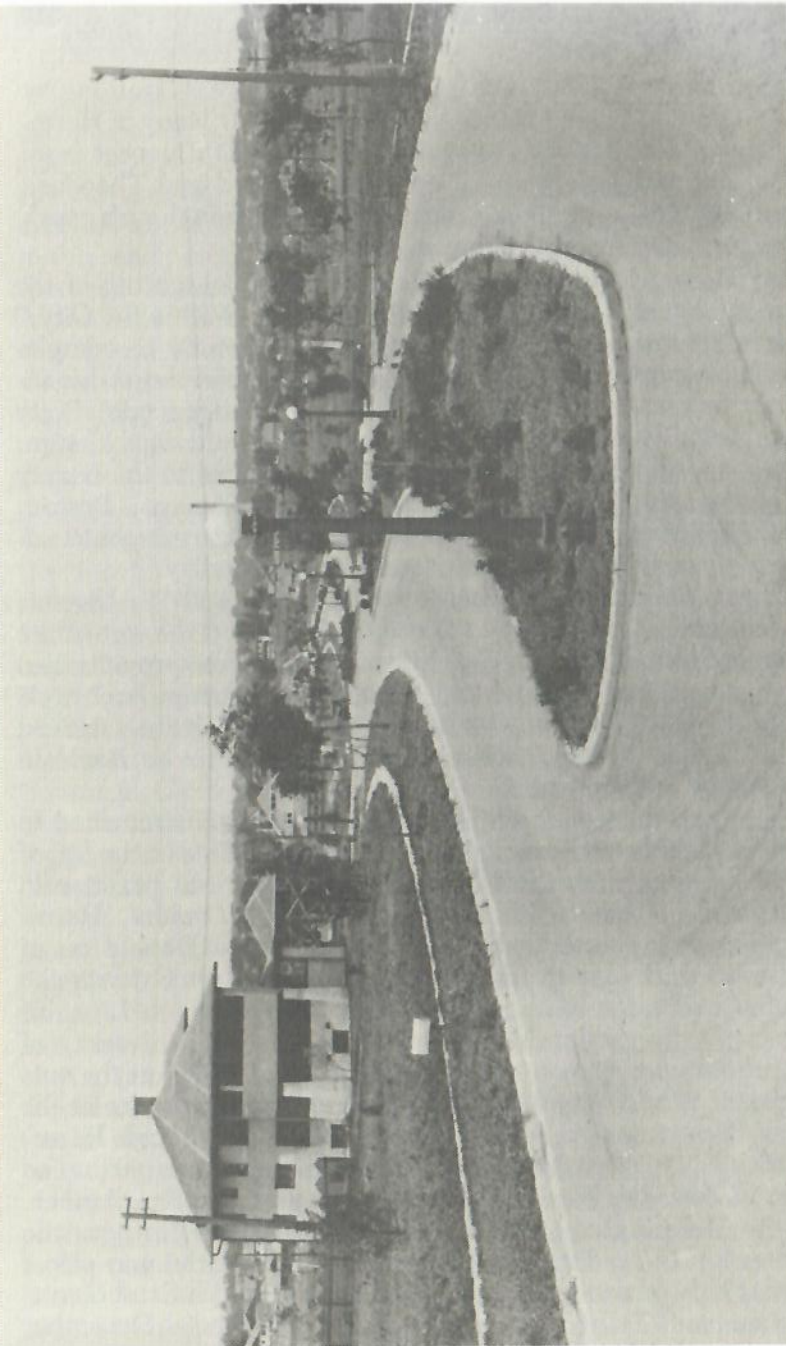
Herminghaus's knack with ornamental plants, accomplished draftsmanship, and sketching talents were excellent background for entrance into the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the landscape architecture program in the fall of 1913. His drawing skill is even more amazing since he had lost the use of one eye in an accident during high school. While at

Harvard he was exposed to an eclectic, Beaux Arts training by F. L. Olmsted Jr. and Henry Vincent Hubbard. Many of Herminghaus's later designs are visible evidence of influences from the classic text *Landscape Design* by Hubbard and Theodora Kimball. Those designs, particularly Herminghaus's park work, emphasize form, balance, and space.

At Harvard in his senior thesis, "Artificial Lighting of the Street, Square, Park and Other Public Areas Within the City," Herminghaus took a different direction of study to complement his horticultural background. The thesis shows his interest in architectural material and the broader scope of city planning, which provides the context for landscape design. The paper is liberally sprinkled with references to the beauty of American cities such as New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. which Herminghaus admiringly calls "the most striking city in this country."⁷

Ernst Herminghaus became friends with Tell W. Nicolet, another MLA candidate at Harvard. They and the rest of the Harvard senior landscape architecture class were present at an early meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in Boston, when Fredrico Vitale stirred Herminghaus's imagination concerning the *Prix de Rome* in landscape architecture.⁸

Upon graduation from Harvard, Herminghaus returned to Lincoln and briefly entered graduate school. Late in the fall of 1915 he opened the first landscape architectural practice in Nebraska.⁹ Working in both Lincoln and Omaha, Herminghaus collaborated with architect Alan MacDonald on at least one park plan in Lincoln, the Antelope Park Extension,¹⁰ at the east edge of the city. Nicolet also came to Lincoln, where he taught landscape architecture in the University of Nebraska's department of horticulture. But in 1917 at the outbreak of World War I, he was called to military service at the War Department in Washington, D.C. Even though Herminghaus's eye kept him from active duty, Nicolet persuaded him to come to Washington and work as a civilian planner. There Herminghaus gained valuable experience in how the profession of landscape architecture could aid the war effort through the planning of camps and housing. Both Ernst Herminghaus and Tell Nicolet were present at a special December 7, 1918, meeting of the ASLA in Washington.¹¹



During the 1920s Ernest Herminghaus designed the layout and landscapes for many of Woods Brothers Silo and Manufacturing Company's residential developments in south Lincoln. The Sam Waugh house (left) was located on Bradford Drive near its juncture with Sheridan Boulevard.

In 1919 after the Armistice, Herminghaus worked with Nicolet on subdivision layouts in Pennsylvania. He returned to Lincoln in the summer of 1920 and spent several weeks preparing a park plan for the Rome Prize Design Competition. Dr. H. O. Werner remembers that the chairman of the horticulture department at that time, Dr. R. A. Emerson, provided space in the plant industry building for Herminghaus to produce the drawings and then vouched for their authenticity.¹² While Herminghaus did not win the competition, he continued his interest in parks and became a key force in an expanding Lincoln park system.

The boom of the post-World-War-I era brought a surge of quality residential growth to Lincoln. In 1922 at age 32 Herminghaus began work for Lincoln's most progressive real estate developer, Woods Brothers Silo and Manufacturing Company. Before that company had begun its development of the prairie ridges south of Lincoln overlooking Antelope Creek, the city had been expanding on the "gridiron" plan so common in the Midwest. Woods Brothers employed Herminghaus to lay out the Woodshire subdivision near what is now the Lincoln Country Club. He also designed the layout for the Rathbone subdivision. These designs were reminiscent of Frederick Law Olmsted's Riverside subdivision near Chicago and were of a Beaux Arts style. The landscaped roadways and boulevards were more sympathetic to the contours of the land than a straight grid and were set up to support varying degrees of traffic; the lots were large and furnished with abundant landscape plants. Many properties still contain formal privet hedges as a trademark of Herminghaus's design work. In the Woodshire subdivision of 1925 Herminghaus provided a private open space area to be administered by a perpetual homeowners' association. The park is a narrow north-to-south ravine, which is three blocks long and abuts to a low ridge. A visual tie to the city terminates on a view of the Goodhue Capitol tower. This view was not immediately apparent to the first lot buyers, because even though the tower was planned, it had not yet been erected. The park plantings in the ravine were placed not only to give visual privacy across the ravine and for the user within, but also to frame the site's external view of the Capitol tower. Here in the Woodshire Park we see Herminghaus's use of shrub masses to reinforce the enclosure of the ravine bank.

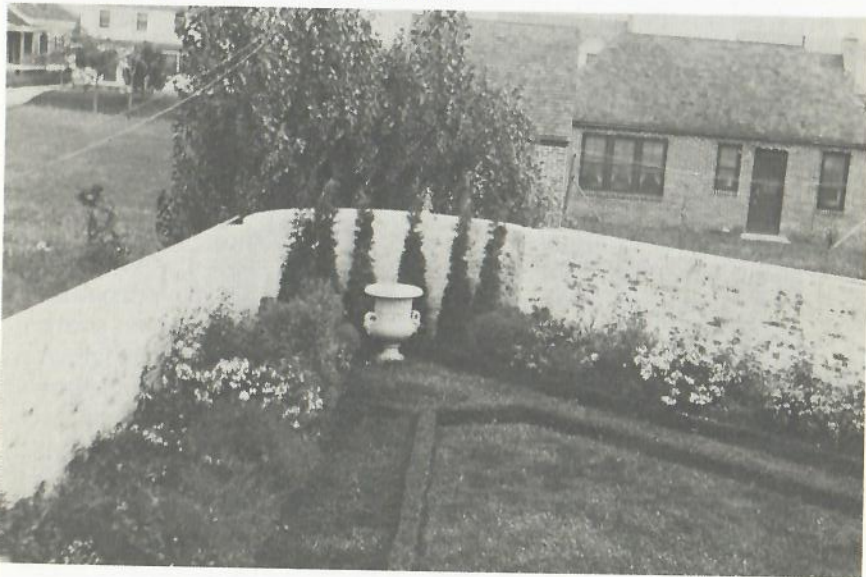
Woodshire and other Woods Brothers developments were a success. Lincoln's emerging elite moved into these areas. During the 1920s Herminghaus produced many individual residential plantings, often using stock from the adjacent Woods Brothers nursery. He also collaborated with architect Bruce Hazen, producing landscapes for the Earl Campbell residence, 2600 Woodscresc; the Don Miller residence at 2536 Woodscresc; Everett House at 2433 Woodscresc; and for a home at 2310 Woodsdale. Hazen designed Herminghaus's own home in Woodshire at 1936 Kings Highway.¹³ Through these contacts (many of whom were old classmates from Lincoln High) and his efforts to organize such cultural events as the Lincoln Symphony, Garden Club of Lincoln, and the Nebraska Art Association, Herminghaus prospered.

While the bulk of Herminghaus's residential work in the 1920s was in Lincoln, there are no written descriptions or plans available for those designs. We can still see much of the intended structure in extant gardens, but landscapes—unlike architecture—are exposed to the vagaries of nature. Most of the fragile, formal edges and detailed structure of Herminghaus's Beaux Arts schemes, such as hedges, pools, and perennial borders, have not received the continued attention required to preserve their original composition or form. However, in one case, Herminghaus did publish a design for the C. E. Abbott garden in *American Landscape Architecture* in October of 1931.¹⁴ It is exemplary of both the Beaux Arts design style and Herminghaus's interest in plant species for Nebraska.

Herminghaus divided the plan into thirds. The front third, reminiscent of an English park, is an informal lawn punctuated with asymmetrical clumps of trees and a semicircular drive. The middle third includes the house and the garage, tightly interconnected with a formal garden. In the garden a lawn is flanked by perennial beds and terminates on a reflecting pool and pergola. Herminghaus designed the pergola as a repetition of the formal detailing on the rear porch at the opposite end of the garden axis. The pergola also serves as the gateway to the rear third of the garden. Overall the garden is reminiscent of the Italian garden. In the last third Herminghaus developed an 80-foot-square central space defined by a barberry hedge and enclosed and enframed by an arboretum



The Ernst Herminghaus home, 1946 Kings Highway, was designed in the late 1920s by architect Bruce Hazen. . . . (Below) The back yard shows the formal placement of urn and upright junipers. The brick wall has a simple indented detail reminiscent of an Italian garden. Herminghaus attached irrigation sprinklers to the top of the wall, an innovation for the 1920s. Courtesy of Mrs. Martha Herminghaus.



containing some 100 trees, many native to Nebraska.

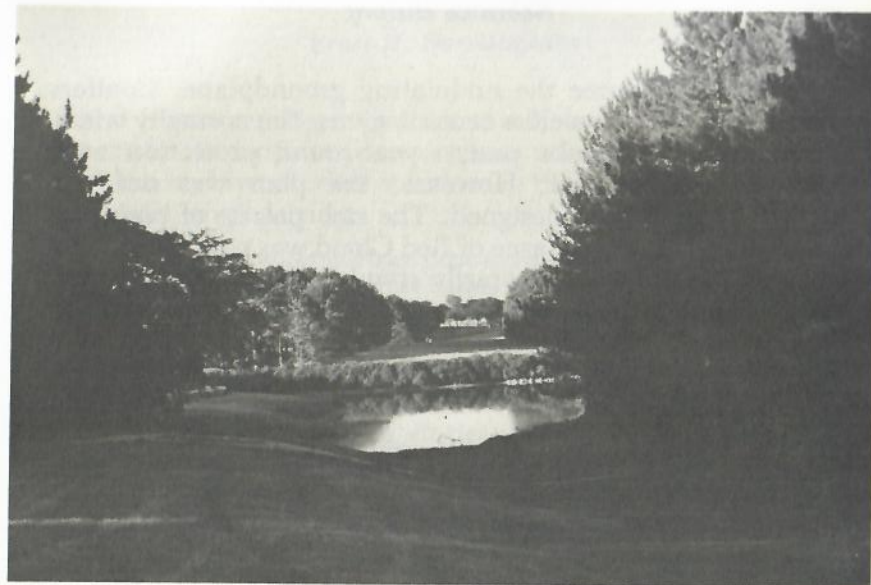
Introducing the design, Herminghaus notes:

It would seem, therefore, that in addition to Nebraska's origin of a legalized Arbor Day, there are many arbor days in Nebraska where an appreciation of trees for their utilitarian and esthetic benefits is general among the inhabitants of the state. Because of this widespread interest in trees, it is not surprising to find a portion of the grounds in one of Nebraska's principal cities devoted to an arboretum.¹⁵

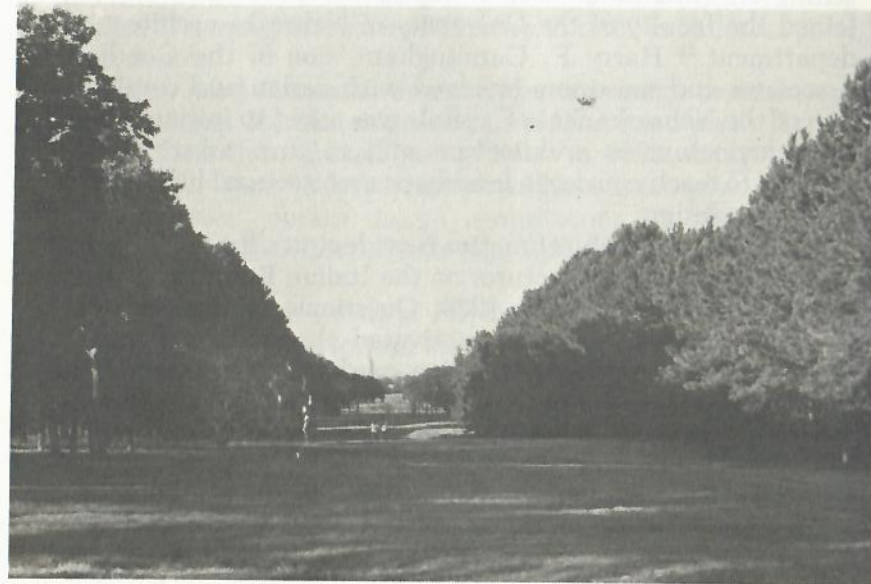
I believe this last third represents Herminghaus's attempt to adapt his Beaux Arts style to Nebraska. Beaux Arts provides the overall form, while the historical interest in Arbor Day and use of native and hardy exotic trees provides the conceptual and physical framework for the arboretum.

John F. Harris donated 500 acres of prairie for a park outside Lincoln overlooking the Salt Creek Valley in October of 1928. Herminghaus was not immediately chosen to plan the park but began his involvement by serving as a consultant to the city council in obtaining masterplan proposals. In March of 1929 three proposals were submitted: one by P. E. McMillan, a local landscape architect; one by Sonderegger Nurseries of Beatrice; and one from Irvin McCrary of Denver. A golf course, proposed as part of Harris's original program, was designed separately by Willie Dunn and Harry B. McNeal of Kansas City. These two golf consultants were brought to Lincoln at the urging of Herminghaus.¹⁶ It is unclear why, but after some initial planting along the park boundary in the spring of 1929, none of the three solicited plans were implemented, and on January 1, 1930, Herminghaus completed a design for the first 80 acres of the park.¹⁷

Pioneers Park is a classic Beaux Arts plan with carefully controlled spatial sequences. Former dean of architecture and engineering at Nebraska, the late L. Burr Smith, notes, "Ernst's invitation to enter sets the mood at Pioneers Park . . . using plantings and spaces as a sequence with the skill of a set designer."¹⁸ Two major allees focus on the Goodhue Capitol. One internal allee ties together a sculpture of a buffalo and the proposed site of a sculpture of Sioux Chief Red Cloud. Plantings were selected to give the widest variety of species adaptable to Nebraska, and in that sense the park was to be an arboretum which would complete his earlier call for a Nebraska botanical garden. Mass plantings of shrubs, as in the Wood-



Herminghaus created for Lincoln's Pioneers Park formal spaces in the tradition of eclectic Beaux Arts design. In an internal vista (above) the hedge at the far side of the pond conceals a road. Close massing of evergreens (below) make an external visual link to Goodhue's Capitol tower readily apparent even in winter.



shire Park, reenforce the undulating groundplane. Conifers were mass planted on close centers, giving the normally wind-ridden, open Nebraska prairie year-round protection with strong spatial control. However, the plan was not implemented exactly as designed. The rich palette of plantings was reduced, and the statue of Red Cloud was not placed. The ensuing Depression temporarily stymied the development of the park, but with the help of CCC and WPA labor, thousands of Austrian and ponderosa pine, juniper, spruce, hackberry, and Siberian elm were planted and nursed through the dry years of the "Dust Bowl." The overall spatial scheme is exactly as Herminghaus designed it.

Later in 1935, Herminghaus proposed a plan for the "Harris Arboretum" as a subsection of the park,¹⁹ but it was never implemented. In it he used his entire vocabulary of ornamental plant material; this would have added the richness of the planting design not originally followed. The layout and circulation route were similar to those of C. E. Bessey's arboretum at the University of Nebraska.

The Depression years found the Woods Brothers company falling on hard times, but in September 1930 Herminghaus joined the faculty of the University of Nebraska architecture department.²⁰ Harry F. Cunningham, one of the Goodhue Associates and successors involved with design and construction of the Nebraska State Capitol, was asked to initiate a formal curriculum in architecture and in turn asked Herminghaus to teach courses in landscape architectural history and landscape design.

The Beaux Arts subject matter is evident in a list of 100 questions from the history lectures on the Italian Renaissance that Herminghaus published in 1930. Questions: "What were the three branches of art that motivated the design of villas? Where is the most famous Italian garden axis and view? In which villa are the largest cypress? What two villas are famous for water gardens? Where was the first botanical garden?"²¹ The list of questions suggests the depth and breadth of historical detail that Herminghaus felt a landscape architect must possess to design in the Beaux Arts style.

The design classes as well concentrated on the Beaux Arts style, yet the inventive problems posed by Herminghaus required students to integrate historical examples with the func-

tional requirements and setting of a Nebraska farm as a basis for model farm courts. Herminghaus published the farm court problem and two student solutions in the *American Landscape Architect*, emphasizing:

Little work of this sort has been done anywhere else other than the more elaborate farm plans of the great estates in the East, where the work of Albert Hopkins is noted. Plans such as those reproduced here have become a practical solution for the dirt farmer of Nebraska, with Hopkins' work and the farm courts of Europe, especially those of France, as worthy precedents.²²

Herminghaus's teaching duties in the department of architecture are concentrated on overall design form and function. While there were still landscape classes taught at the College of Agriculture, Herminghaus notes:

Landscape architecture is taught at the University in two separate departments. It can be registered for as a horticultural subject in the Department of Horticulture, or as an architectural subject in the School of Architecture. In the latter school, design is stressed more than planting.²³

Even with his technical skill in plant materials and planting design, Herminghaus elected to move into the broader scope of pure design.

Due to hard economic times residential design commissions were lacking. Herminghaus executed landscape plans for the city of Lincoln's Ashland pump house in 1932, using "plants which have been found to thrive on Nebraska's plains."²⁴ He did, however, obtain design commissions for the Blanche Peters garden in Albion, Nebraska, and the Martin garden in Sioux City, Iowa.

During summer vacation Herminghaus performed garden work for many of his former clients. With his lawn and garden service he maintained many of the plantings he had designed six or eight years earlier.²⁵ Even though his early training was as a horticulturalist, these jobs no doubt gave him an even keener understanding of planting design and its fourth dimension, plant growth over time.

In 1933, 14 years after their appointment, the Nebraska State Capitol Commission members advertised for landscape design and implementation expertise in connection with the setting of the new Capitol building. The well-known building designed by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue had a site plan with only sketchy

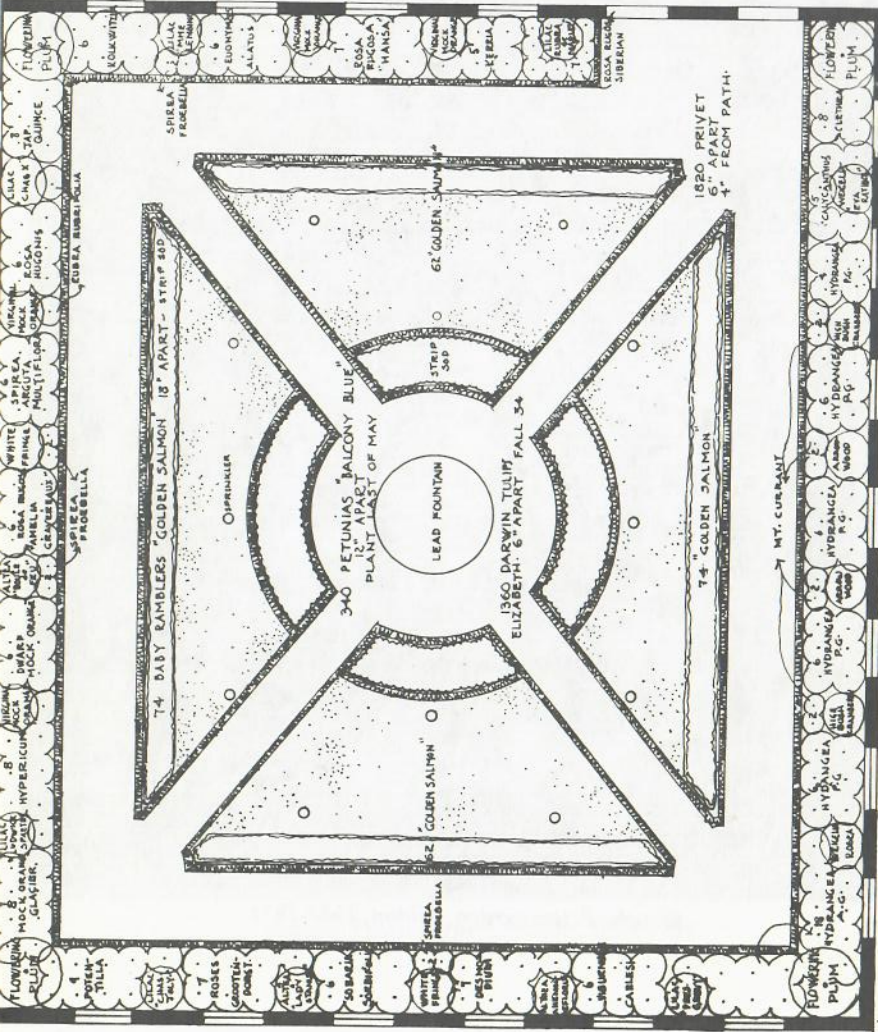


Blanche Peters garden, Albion, 1933-1934



Blanche Peters garden, Albion, 1933-1934

PLANTING LIST



The enclosed Capitol courtyards, such as the southwest court, allowed Herminghaus to display his plant palette and add year-round visual excitement. Each had different color successions of tulips, petunias, and roses to supplement the shrub border.

indications of massing and visual criteria for the landscaping. A Goodhue successor, O. H. Murray, completed another plan, also with general criteria and an exotic plant list. Herminghaus was the logical choice and was commissioned in December of 1933 to produce a plan and to estimate and supervise installation.²⁶ Herminghaus applied his understanding of the visual needs of the building, knowledge of plant material, and horticultural expertise to accomplish in only two months the design, selection, and supervision of hundreds of transplants. The deviations that Herminghaus made from the concepts put forth by Goodhue and Murray indicate that he understood better than the architects certain visual aspects of the building and the appropriateness of certain plants to Lincoln's climate. For instance, he did not use flowering shrubs suggested by Goodhue in the foundation planting because color would detract from the rich detailing visible around the building base; for the same reason he did not use flower displays at the south and north entrances²⁷ but framed and reenforced these entrances by using carefully studied and scaled rows of conifers.²⁸ These evergreen plants, which helped to create a grand entrance space on the north steps, were 16-20 foot concolor fir transplants from the Lydick farm windbreak in Burt County. Most of the vertical cedar plantings punctuating the foundation were dug from the yards of Lincoln and Omaha residents. His elevational studies show that he was looking for exact plant heights to complete the composition.

The plans for the interior courtyards were another matter. Herminghaus's plan proposed the rich diversity of shrubs and small trees which would serve to make retreats for Capitol users. These planting plans are an example of Herminghaus's mature design style using plants adaptable to the local environment.

In 1935 Herminghaus became associated with George Prince Architects of Omaha in planning the site of the Logan-Fontenelle homes. He also continued other Lincoln works such as the 15th Street mall south of the Capitol in August 1935;²⁹ the Quadrangle at Antelope Zoo in March 1936;³⁰ redesign of Havelock Park in September 1936;³¹ the Playstead in Antelope Park in October 1936;³² and Antelope Park in December 1937.³³ He moved his private practice to Omaha in 1939 to work mainly on residential gardens.



Ernst Herman Herminghaus embodied the talents and vision of an "old school" of landscape architects. His ability to cope with changing economic and social situations is just one facet of his talents. He was able to deal with the technical details of landscape implementation as evidenced by the massive planting effort at the State Capitol, which would be an enormous undertaking to coordinate today, even in a large design firm.

Herminghaus's rapport with the nursery profession is largely responsible for his success on the Capitol landscape project. However, he was more than a mere technician; he was also a teacher and generally able to work within and inspire cultural and humanistic goals in his design work. For example, tangential to his professional interests were his lifelong efforts on behalf of the park system, gardens, art, and music in Lincoln. Ernst Herminghaus has had a large, beneficial, and lasting impact on the landscape quality of Lincoln and Nebraska.

NOTES

1. Ernst Herminghaus, "Artificial Lighting of the Street, Square, Park and Other Public Areas Within the City," unpublished masters thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1915, p. 8.
2. Elsebert Spencer Kroeger, *Herminghaus History and Genealogy* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1977). Nebraska State Historical Society Library.
3. *Cornhusker*, University of Nebraska Annual (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1913).
4. Ernst Herminghaus, "Beautifying the Farm Home," *Proceedings of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1911), p. 208.
5. Ernst Herminghaus, "The Missouri Botanical Gardens," *Proceedings of the Nebraska State Horticultural Society* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1913), p. 141.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 146. "The farm" is now the UNL East Campus. Herminghaus is probably referring to Professor Charles E. Bessey's arboretum, originally located at 33rd and Holdredge Streets, Lincoln.
7. Herminghaus, "Artificial Lighting," p. 119.
8. C. R. Parker, B. W. Bond, and T. Kimball, *Transactions of the American Society of Landscape Architects* (Boston, Massachusetts, 1909-1921), p. 31.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
10. Ernst Herminghaus landscape plan, "Plans for the Monumental Tablet, Grill and Fence and Gateway for the Antelope Parkway Entrance at Lincoln, Nebraska," February 1, 1917, City of Lincoln, Parks and Recreation Department microfiche.
11. Parker, Bond, and Kimball, p. 42.
12. Interview with Dr. H. O. Werner, April 11, 1977, Lincoln, Nebraska.
13. Interview with Bruce Hazen, April 26, 1983, Lincoln, Nebraska.
14. Ernst Herminghaus, "A Suburban Garden in Nebraska," *American Landscape Architect* (October 1931), pp. 23-25.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
16. *Lincoln Journal*, March 26, 1929.
17. Ernst Herminghaus landscape plan, "Planting Plan for First Eighty Acres, Pioneers Park," January 1, 1930, City of Lincoln, Parks and Recreation Department.
18. Interview with Professor L. Burr Smith, August 29, 1981.

19. Ernst Herminghaus landscape plan, "Harris Arboretum at Pioneers Park," August 1935, City of Lincoln, Parks and Recreation Department microfiche.
20. Dr. Joseph Luther, "Stereotomy and the History of Architecture," *Dimensions* (University of Nebraska College of Architecture, November 1983), pp. 4-5.
21. Ernst Herminghaus, "Ask Me Another," *American Landscape Architect* (December 1930), p. 32.
22. Ernst Herminghaus, "The Model Farm Court," *American Landscape Architect* (July 1931), pp. 18-19.
23. Herminghaus, "Ask Me Another," p. 32.
24. "Landscape Plan for Lincoln Pumphouse Near Ashland to Beautify Water Project," *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, March 5, 1933.
25. Interview with Cornelius Speidell, March 15, 1980.
26. Letter to Ernst Herminghaus from Nebraska Capitol Commission dated November 27, 1933. Nebraska State Historical Society.
27. O. H. Murray landscape plan, "Nebraska State Capitol Planting Plan," April 18, 1933, Drawing 130-C. Nebraska State Historical Society.
28. John Edwards, "One-hundred Sixty-three Full-grown Trees to Soon Deck Capitol Lawn," *Lincoln Star*, January 17, 1934.
29. Ernst Herminghaus landscape plan, "Planting Plan for the Development of South 15th Street, Lincoln," August 1935, City of Lincoln, Parks and Recreation Department microfiche.
30. *Ibid.*, "Planting Plan for the Proposed Zoo Quadrangle at Antelope Park," March 1936.
31. *Ibid.*, "Sketch Plan for the Development and Redesign of the Havelock Park at Lincoln, Nebraska," September 1936.
32. *Ibid.*, "Sketch for the Redesign of a Portion of Antelope Park at Lincoln, Nebraska," October 1936.
33. *Ibid.*, "Planting Plan for the Development of Antelope Golf Course into a Park," December 1937.
34. Hazen, interview.
35. Kroeger, p. 64.
36. "Landscape Architect Dies at 75," *Lincoln Journal*, September 21, 1965.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Kroeger, p. 64.